

# What You Should Know About Blood Pressure

## Blood pressure & hypertension



### What Is Hypertension?

Blood pressure is a measurement of how hard your blood pushes against the artery walls as it moves through your body. Hypertension occurs when you have a sustained increase in your blood pressure. Sometimes blocked or constricted arteries, or blood vessels can cause it. Hypertension, or high blood pressure, is defined as a blood pressure reading of 140/90 or greater.

### What Does My Blood Pressure Reading Mean?

A reading of less than 120/80 is recommended for an adult, but what exactly do these numbers mean? The top number is the systolic pressure or the pressure created in the blood vessels when the heart contracts. The bottom number is the diastolic pressure or the pressure created in the blood vessels when the heart relaxes.

120=systolic: heart contracts  
80=diastolic: heart relaxes

### Changes In Blood Pressure

Blood pressure changes daily. Temporary elevations may be due to exercise, change in diet, anxiety, or stress. Sustained or consistent elevations in blood pressure are much more serious and are a cause for concern. Prehypertension is defined as a blood pressure reading of between 120/80 and 139/89. An individual with two or more blood pressure readings in the prehypertensive or hypertensive range on two separate occasions should consult their physician. Individuals with prehypertension are at increased risk for progression to hypertension.

### Why Is Hypertension Dangerous?

A consistent elevation in blood pressure causes the heart to work harder. An overworked heart increases an individual's risk of heart attack, stroke and heart failure. Additionally, kidney damage and blindness may result.



### Am I at Risk?

Anyone can develop hypertension but some people are at greater risk than others. Being aware of the primary risk factors may help you combat this condition. Common risk factors include:

**Age**—Blood pressure generally increases with age.

**Gender**—Men are more susceptible to high blood pressure than women.

**Heredity**—Family history may double your chances of developing high blood pressure.

**Race**—African-Americans appear to have a greater chance than others for developing high blood pressure.

**Disease**—Approximately 10 percent of all cases of high blood pressure may result from diabetes, kidney disease and thyroid disease.

**Obesity**—Being 20 percent above your recommended weight may double or even triple your chances of developing high blood pressure.

**Smoking**—Smoking cigarettes raises blood pressure and damages your heart and blood vessels.

**Tobacco & Alcohol**—Tobacco and alcohol use can increase blood pressure levels.

### What You Should Do

Lifestyle modifications are your best defense against high blood pressure. You can take responsibility for your own health and well-being by increasing your personal awareness of risk factors and then taking the appropriate steps to minimize them. Here are a few suggestions:

#### ♦ Exercise on a regular basis.

Physical activity has been shown to regulate blood pressure. Discuss starting an exercise program with your doctor if you are not already involved in one.

## What you should do



♦ **Lose any excess weight.**

Control your weight with good exercise and eating habits.

♦ **Learn to control stressful situations.**

Excessive stress may result in high blood pressure for some people. Develop a plan for dealing with stressful situations, such as taking a walk or listening to music. Use this plan as often as possible.

♦ **Stop smoking.**

If you do smoke . . . STOP! Smoking increases the heart rate and can increase blood pressure as much as 20 points. Also, secondary smoke you inflict upon family and friends can impact their health as well.

♦ **Maintain a healthy diet.**

A healthy, balanced diet, which includes plenty of fruits, vegetables and whole grains, will help control your body weight and reduce your risk of high blood pressure. Avoid processed foods and high levels of salt intake.

### General Reference Chart for Adults

| Normal              | Prehypertensive         | High              |
|---------------------|-------------------------|-------------------|
| Less than<br>120/80 | $\frac{120-139}{80-89}$ | 140/90<br>or More |

If your blood pressure is prehypertensive or high, ask your physician for recommendations on lowering it.

### Blood Pressure Record

|   | Date | Systolic | Diastolic | Weight |
|---|------|----------|-----------|--------|
| 1 |      |          |           |        |
| 2 |      |          |           |        |
| 3 |      |          |           |        |
| 4 |      |          |           |        |
| 5 |      |          |           |        |

Blood pressure changes throughout the day and may be affected by diet, fitness level, emotional state, smoking, and genetics. A prehypertensive or high reading does not necessarily mean that you have high blood pressure. However, a pattern of prehypertensive or high numbers should be reported to your physician.

# 10 tips

## 10 Tips to Control Your Blood Pressure

1. Know what your healthy body weight is and try to maintain it.
2. Don't use excess salt when cooking or at meals.
3. Decrease alcohol consumption.
4. Know your family history regarding high blood pressure.
5. Exercise on a regular basis.
6. Manage your emotional stress.
7. If you are on high blood pressure medication, take it as prescribed.
8. Don't smoke cigarettes.
9. Know the primary risk factors for high blood pressure.
10. Know your blood pressure and have it checked regularly.

This information is part of the *Healthy Lifestyles* educational series provided by Health Net Federal Services' Preventive Care Services. Education is one of your best defenses against health risk factors and this series has been developed to help you maintain and improve your health. Health Net Federal Services is committed to your health and well-being.

**The information contained within this document is not a substitute for professional medical advice and treatment.**

# Keep a record